Agrarian Movement:
Past & Present

Robert Meriwether

In the University of Toronto Quarterly (Oct. '57), Northrop Frye said, "The value of centenaries and similar observances is that they call attention, not simply to great men, but to what we do with our great men. The anniversary punctuates, so to speak, the scholarly and critical absorption of its subject into society." It was with just such an attitude in mind that Vanderbilt University and the National Endowment for the Humanities sponsored "Fifty Years After," a symposium commemorating the publication of *I'll Take My Stand* in 1930.

The three day conference included papers by noted scholars and critics from across the nation and a panel discussion by the last three remaining Agrarians, Lyle Lanier, Andrew Lytle, and Robert Penn Warren. This panel discussion was the most publicized event of the symposium and was the only aspect covered by the national news media.

However, the themes and attitudes of that discussion were presaged by the papers of the first four sessions. In his "A Sense of the South: The Persistence of Southern Identity" J. S. Reed, Professor of Sociology at the University of North Carolina, related the Agrarian doctrines to those of other "nationalist" movements. He lambasted the notion that Agrarianism was a localized phenomenon without literary or historical significance.

All the Agrarians, Read pointed out, were world travellers with a keen sense of the relationships between themselves and other writers, and their work and other works. He aimed to "dismiss. . . the view that the twelve were insular writers," and the view that *I'll Take My Stand* is an insular dated manifesto. The South, said Reed, still has much to learn from *'Stand,'* for like Orwell's England of the future, the South has "changed out of recognition yet remains the same."

M. E. Bradford reiterated that theme with his description of the "continuing life" of the book. In his own experience, he had found "a marked appeal to young people both South and North," as well as continuing critical acclaim. Indeed, he said he agreed with a recent Houston editorial which said, "The Agrarians have the right to say, *I told you so.*"!

The symposium generally followed this tone of verification. *I'll Take My Stand* was compared with the French *Encyclopedia*, for its purpose, under the direction of Allen Tate, was to form "an academy or society of southern activists with a constitution. . . to crystallize southern sentiment behind them and provide a united, organized and philisophically coherent front to the Progressives." Southern intellectualism, particularly the "band gathered around William Gilmore Simms" was depicted as peculiarly closer to history and to the American Revolution than New England intellectuals.

These twelve southern Intellectuals, according to Professor Simpson, "enlisted intellect against itself." Theirs was a fresher republic of letters than that of the North, and one which was also closer to European thought. Professor's Heiloman and Rock strengthened the link between the Agrarians and European men of letters. Heiloman saw comparisons with the works of Wordsworth, Goldsmith, and Blake, and felt that "the fusion of Agrarianism with intellectualism in the South" contributed to the importance and continuing impact of the book.

Louis Rubin's "The Literary Background of *I'll Take My Stand*" and George Core's "The Influence of the Agrarians on Literary Criticism" focused on the literary milieu of the Agrarian manifesto. Rubin echoed Heiloman to some extent, but delved more deeply into the contemplative and philosophical background provided by Emerson and Thoreau. Core touched on the lives of the Fugitives as "second-class citizens" on the Vanderbilt campus, but centered on the Agrarian/Fugitive influence on criticism. As they "turned their talents to not only writing but a new way of criticizing and of teaching," the Agrarians left a permanent mark on the modern world of letters.

"Industrialization was their adversary."

The final session of the symposium was chaired by Cleanth Brooks, Gray Professor of Rhetoric Emeritus at Yale and contributor to the 1936 collection of essays, *Who Owns America*. In the panel discussion the last three Agrarians showed, as Lyle Lanier said, they were "still standing, but not standing still." In fact they had moved onward though in somewhat divergent directions. Warren spoke of the dehumanizing forces of modern, urban society of today and asked "what happens to people?" He discussed what makes a Merit Scholar, concluding that there is "always someone behind the child to give it a long range sense of person and drive." But Warren felt that *I'll Take My Stand* had fallen short of giving constructive suggestions to fight urban dehumanization and perhaps produce more Merit Scholars.

Lytle discussed "the small farm as the source of the strength of the state," his interest at the time of the book's publication, and indicated that his views were essentially the same today. "Heritage," he said," and the family that sees itself as older" provides the strength needed both to give anchor and to drive the descendents onward. You've got to have that old grandmother in the back room saying "I'll pull your tongue out if you lie!"

Lanier seemed the most modern of the three. Although he claimed to buy the Wall St. Journal on Friday just to see what the enemy is up to, he was not averse to the application of modern technology on the farm. He spoke of the prophetic ecology of the Agrarians: their anticipation of the current need for a post industrial society centered in the country, not the city. Solar energy, he often repeated, should be used much more extensively.

A tale of Lytle's near the end of the symposium, provided a lifting postscript to the entire event. A great uncle of Lytle's, it seems, once cheerfully and immediately attacked a much larger adversary when that adversary said, "You are so small your wife would have to shake the sheets on her bed to find you!" Finding his torso wrapped up by the uncle's arms and legs and his back carved by a pocket knife, the bully pleaded, "Somebody come take me off this little man!" Lytle saw the moral of the story as the necessity for retaining a "sense of self," but it seems peculiarly apropos, considering the history of *I'll Take My Stand*. First criticized soundly by the literery esteblishment in America, the book's obvious popularity and importance today should make those critics exclaim, "Somebody come take me off this little man!"

Of Babbits and Rabbits

F. James Coleman

Decried as "Young Confederates," "typewriter agrarians," "a socially reactionary band," the twelve southern authors of *I'll Take My Stand* received mixed reviews of their treatise on the South and its agrarian tradition following its publication in 1930. However, controversial essays were to prove a catalyst of significant import in spurring along the growing literary renaissance in the South during the late twenties and early nineteen-thirties.

I'll Take My Stand employs the rural South as a metaphor in its attack on industrialism and the belief in the perfectibility of man through secular progress. Louis D. Rubin Jr., Professor of English at the University of North Carolina and author of several critical works on the Agrarians, aptly describes the book, "a rebuke to materialism, a corrective to the worship of Progress, and a reaffirmation of man's esthetic and spiritual needs."

Modern study of the Agrarian movement is not simply an exercise in nostalgia. The Agrarians were not merely apologists or idealizers of southern life as it had been. Rather, as Rubin further suggests, "the Agrarians had much to offer as humanists suggesting how the fruits of economic progress could be used as a means to the more spiritual side of a good, full, and happy life."

The message of the Agrarians is particularly salient today. Partial testimony to this fact was the "Fifty Years After" symposium featuring a panel discussion by Robert Penn Warren, Andrew Nelson Lytle, and Lyle Lanier.

The other nine authors of *I'll Take My Stand* included Donald Davidson, John Gould Fletcher, H. B. Kline, Stark Young, Allen Tate, H. C Nixon, F. L. Owsley, John Crowe Ransom, and John Donald Wade.

The symposium was of interest to Walsh-Ellet dwellers and Wood's Labites alike. Both Allen Tate and Andrew Lytle have taught at the University of the South and edited the Sewanee Review. George Core, the present editor of the Sewanee Review, delivered a paper at the symposium entitled "The Influence of the Agrarians on Literary Criticism."

As a group the Agrarians were centered in Nashville. Underpinings of the movement were found concretely based in the "Fugitives," sixteen poets associated with Vanderbilt who met frequently from 1915-1918 to discuss and read their work. Their combined energies resulted in the publication of nineteen issues of "The Fugitive," a literary journal devoted almost exclusively to poetry. Four of these Fugitives, Ransom, Davidson, Tate, and Warren, became Agrarians as well, submitting essays to *I'll Take My Stand*.

That twelve men of divergent creative powers came together in a joint creative venture is no less than amazing. Louise Cowan, recognized for her significant studies of the Fugitive and Agrarians, believes, "the first group [the Fugitives] experienced a creative venture into the realm of intuitive knowledge, [that] gave rise to the critical and speculative activity of the second."

All the Agrarians were southerners, with a firm belief in southern society, and a profound aversion to mindless industrialization. Additionally, *I'll Take My Stand* was a concerted rebuttal of the vicious attack on southern fundamentalist "ballyhoism" by northern journalists following the Scopes "monkey-trial." Of those Yankee critics perhaps H. L. Mencken had the most scathing remarks. "The South produces nothing and reads nothing. It is culturally about as dead as Yucatan." The old Baltimorian scourge would later concede a little. After publication of *I'll Take My Stand* he quipped, "they have produced a book which deserves attention. . . it reveals a free and bold spirit, and that is surely something."

This bold spirit is probably best characterized by Andrew Lytle's contribution to *I'll Take My Stand*. His essay, "The Hind Tit," exalts the sturdy yeoman's way of life in his description of the Tennessee farmer. Reverberations of that 1930 theme are sounded in his most recently published "Reflections of a Ghost": "I can't believe any society is strong which holds physical comfort as its quest."

The Agrarians sought neither a golden age nor an Edenic Utopia. They did seek a simpler life and a restoration of the traditional virtues of honor, truth, and human dignity, linked with limited capitalist aquisitiveness. Industrialization was their adversary due to the dollar mania and dehumanization associated with the American Progressive movement. The Agrarians were not anti-city; they were anti-bourgeois. As Ulrich B. Phillips of the Yale Review concludes in his description of the collaborating Agrarians, "the group believed blatant Americanism, if left unchecked, would wreck farming as a mode of life, eclipse the gentry by exalting the yellow rich, obliterate provincial distinctiveness, and propegate Babbitts like Rabbits.